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HOMEMAKERS' CHAT

Monday, April 8, 1940

Subject: "STARTING THE FLOWER GARDEN." Information from the Bureau of Plant Industry, U.S. Department of Agriculture. Publication available, Farmers' Bulletin, 1171-F, Growing Annual Flowering Plants.

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April and May are the flower-planting months over a large part of the United States. Of course the exact time of planting in the open is more or less regulated by the date of the last spring frost. But you can start a number of the ornamental annual flowering plants in the house or in cold frames ahead of that date, and move them to the garden when the weather makes transplanting safe.

As to what to plant,- we have a wide choice in most any part of this country. What you plant naturally depends on the place in the garden where you want the flowers to grow- the kind of soil you have, the color effects you want, the size plants you want, and so on. You may feel that you need a few annuals in among your newly planted shrubbery and perennials which often look thin and ragged for a while. Annuals can fill otherwise bare spaces with attractive foliage and bright flowers.

And most annual flowering plants are gay with blooms at seasons when perennials and shrubs are not. Even if you live on a rented place, you can grow a few annuals to beautify the outside grounds, without much work or much expense. You may not give the soil quite the same preparation that it would get if you expected to have the garden year after year, but with reasonable attention and fertilizing, you can produce very satisfactory results.

But, whether you are planning your annuals as a background, a border, a formal bed, or chiefly to have cut flowers through the summer, a design of some kind is useful. You want the total effect to be pleasing, with tall and low-growing plants in the right relative positions and pleasing color masses against suitable backgrounds.

April 8, 1940

- 2 -

Some colors harmonize well when near each other, and others conflict. When you look closely at the varied colors of an old-fashioned flower garden, you will probably find that its charm lies in the good color harmonies and contrasts, whether by design or accident.

Some of the annuals are adapted to one kind of soil and some to another. Certain plants must have bright sunshine with plenty of fertility and moisture. Others will grow in partial shade. Some need light soil, but all require reasonably good soil. Some you can plant near the seacoast. And there are a good many that do well under average garden conditions.

Again, some of the plants you will choose are hardy, and some are tender. The Bureau of Plant Industry puts the difference between them in this way:

"Hardy plants can be sown after freezing weather is past, and they will stand light frosts. Plant them as soon as the ground is dry enough to work."

The seeds of half-hardy plants may be sown "about the time leaves begin to appear on the trees that put out their foliage earliest." And the seeds of tender plants go in the open ground only when all danger from frost is past, which is "about the time that white oak leaves are the size of squirrels' ears." And that's about as close as anyone can come to the proper date for planting the different annuals.

You want to prepare the soil well and give it some fertilizer, because annuals have to make a quick growth. The best soil for most annuals is a light, sandy loam, well supplied with rotted manure. If the soil is thin and poor, it is worth while to dig deeply and work in plenty of rotted manure.

And if you want seeds to germinate promptly, you try to make it easy for them. It must be possible for the seeds to take up moisture readily, to have a proper degree of heat, and to be able to push through the soil without encountering a hard, resistant crust of earth. So in some climates it may be best to start all but the hardiest seeds indoors or in specially prepared beds.

April 8, 1940

In the actual selection of annual flower seeds for planting, you will find it very helpful to send for Farmers' Bulletin 1171-F. Write to the U.S. Department of Agriculture and ask for it by number or by the title- "Growing Annual Flowering Plants." This bulletin arranges the common flowering annuals in groups, and tells just the sort of thing you will want to know about each one- how tall it grows, the colors you can expect in different varieties- whether or not it is hardy and how it should be planted, and which ones to use for a particular purpose--such as a low-growing border, or the background of a flower-bed- the kind of soil required, and the length of the blooming season.

For example, suppose you want blue flowers in a certain bed. You can choose among cornflowers and larkspur, growing 2-1/2 feet tall. Or have lupine or balloonflowers, 2 feet high. Or plant a border of low-growing nemophila, ageratum, lobelia, verbenas, and forgetmenot. And then you can look up white flowers, red, yellow, orange, pink, lavender ones, or almost any other usual flower color you want in your garden design. There's a chart, too, so you need not make the mistake of putting the wrong colored flowers next to each other.

Let's check over the chief points in starting a flower garden: Plants suited to your locality, set out according to a definite plan. Good soil, enriched for quick growth. Pleasing color masses. Plants of heights suited to the use made of them. And finally, the gardener's guide entitled "Growing Annual Flowering Plants." With that in hand, and a close watch until the "white oak leaves are the size of squirrels' ears", the success of your flower garden is pretty well assured.

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